



Iraq Needs a New Kind of Partnership With the United States

The Path to Sustainable Cooperation

By **Mohammed Shia al-Sudani**

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Two decades ago, the United States assisted the Iraqi people in overthrowing the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein and laying the foundations for a democratic system. It enabled Iraqis to taste freedom for the first time, eliminating the oppression and the misuse of resources that had caused problems not only for my country but also for the region more broadly.

Since then, U.S.-Iraqi relations have gone through ups and downs, periods of engagement and disengagement, with positions sometimes aligned and other times beset by tensions. Throughout, however, there has been a shared understanding among leaders of both countries that our relationship would remain a strategic priority, underpinned by shared interest and collaborative efforts to overcome difficulties. Together we have defeated terrorism, and security cooperation has allowed us to rebuild the Iraqi army and efficient security forces.

Today, we need to protect our strategic partnership by bringing it to a new phase—one that supports the sovereignty and independence of Iraq without foregoing fruitful cooperation between Baghdad and Washington. In late January, we formed the High Military Committee, composed of top military officials from both the United States and Iraq, to assess the ongoing threat of the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS), the capabilities of the Iraqi security services, and operational conditions throughout the country. That effort has led to an agreement among all stakeholders to end the international coalition in a gradual and orderly manner on

an agreed timetable. (The coalition was formed in 2014 to fight ISIS, and it includes 86 countries, led by the United States and invited by Iraq.) Going forward, the High Military Committee will develop a road map for future relations, including the presence of U.S. advisers. Those moves, contrary to marking a downgrade in our relationship with the United States, will allow us to move to a new phase of partnership, based on cooperation that goes beyond just security and military affairs.

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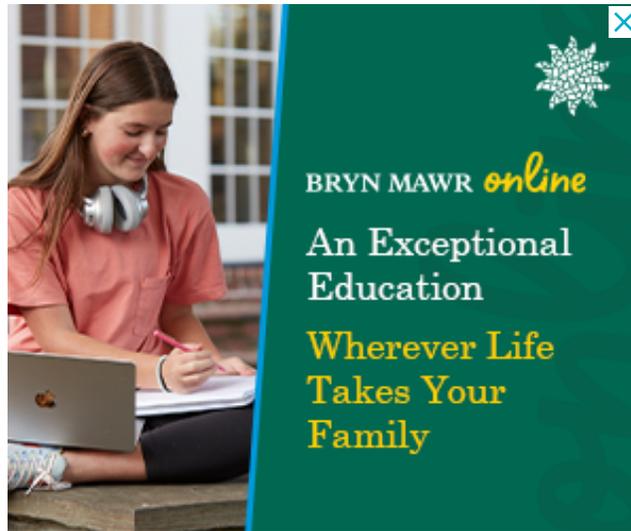
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A FINE BALANCE

The U.S.-Iraqi relationship is key to the stability of the Middle East, as well as to the prosperity of the region's people. In recent years, tensions have occasionally arisen between our two countries as a result of conflict with armed groups that have existed in Iraq for the past two decades. These groups grew out of the complex circumstances that Iraq encountered while confronting terrorism. But little by little, as security and stability are restored, the need for weapons outside the control of the state and its institutions will disappear. We are working concertedly toward that end.

Iraq has a long and challenging road ahead. My government is aware of its sensitive position and the delicate balance that it must maintain between the United States and groups that sometimes enter into direct conflict with American forces. But our

vision for this situation is clear: we reject attacks on American interests in Iraq or in neighboring countries. At the same time, we need time to manage internal complexities and reach political understandings with the various parties. The decision to make war and peace must be an exclusive matter for the state, and no other party can claim this right.



With the assistance of its friends—especially the United States—Iraq has managed to defeat the most ruthless terrorist organization in recent history. Now, only small ISIS groups remain; they are being pursued by our security forces, across deserts and mountains and into caves, but they no longer pose a threat to the state. This conflict has significantly enhanced the experience of our security forces, placing them among the best armies in combating terrorism. The time has thus come to turn a page and redirect our resources and capabilities from waging wars toward promoting development.

Ultimate victory over terrorism is unattainable without genuine development, including a decent standard of health care, education, and other essential services.

This is the objective of the program my government has developed and is determined to execute: pushing through economic and financial reforms, enhancing human rights, empowering women, generally fostering the principles of freedom and democracy. It is also crucial that we combat corruption—the other face of terrorism, since its effect is no less devastating—and ensure that the Iraqi people’s money is put toward meaningful ends. We must also diversify our economy away from reliance on oil, even as we capitalize on our position as the second-largest oil-exporting country in OPEC (in addition to having substantial natural gas reserves). To that end, we are advancing cross-border projects (such as industrial zones with neighboring countries) and the Development Road, which serves to link the Gulf region with Turkey and Europe.

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As part of this effort, we now have an opportunity to transform the relationship between Iraq and the United States from a single-faceted one to a comprehensive one. The time has come to activate all the provisions of the Strategic Framework Agreement signed in 2008 by Iraq and the United States. That agreement goes well beyond just security and military affairs, which have dominated the relationship for much of the past two decades, and features terms for cooperation in areas such as the economy and investment, energy and climate, agriculture and industry, and technology and education.

Given their collective sacrifices, both the Iraqi and the American people deserve to see continued benefits from this partnership. Iraq’s current stability should

encourage American companies to take part in significant development projects in energy, telecommunications, housing, health care, education, transport, and more. Our urgent need for American expertise and technology extends to clean energy and the green economy, as we aim to develop sustainable and renewable sectors. The Strategic Framework Agreement established the legal groundwork for these activities. And by investing in them we can position Iraq to enhance its democracy, strengthen the state, and reinforce the rule of law—the pillars that will allow us to restore Iraq to its historical splendor.

IRAQ FIRST

The guiding principle of our foreign relations is “Iraq first”—building strong partnerships based on common interests with friendly countries in our region and beyond. This principle means that we approach every country on equal terms, so that Iraq does not become an arena for any outside actor to settle scores. Iraq must be dealt with on the basis of sovereignty and mutual respect, not as a proxy for other conflicts.

That is also why we seek to restore Iraq’s pivotal role in the Middle East, taking advantage of our strategic location. We welcome the opportunity to work with the United States to defuse crises and reduce tensions in the Middle East. Yet we are intent on avoiding becoming caught in the conflict between two of our partners, Iran and the United States. We consider a comprehensive de-escalation in the Middle East to be in both Iraqi and U.S. interests. That requires, above all, urgently ending the war in the Gaza Strip and respecting the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.

When I visit Washington and meet with President Joe Biden on April 15, it will be an opportunity to put the U.S.-Iraqi partnership on a new, more sustainable foundation. Our discussions will emphasize the continued importance of our economic relationship, cooperation on combating money laundering and terrorist financing, and using political and diplomatic tools to defuse regional tensions. The fight against terrorism will continue to be a central topic for both of our governments.

We recognize and value the crucial role of the United States and other members of the international coalition to combat ISIS in defeating terrorism. This support has helped Iraq achieve stability and make significant strides on democracy, the rule of law, and ensuring that the government has a monopoly on the use of force. Yet we believe the time is right for our relationship to become broader, recognizing the growing capabilities of our forces to defend Iraq and ensure the safety of its citizens—and contributing in essential ways to the construction of a prosperous and stable Iraq. In its new form, our partnership can represent both a source of mutual benefit for both of our countries and a driving force in achieving stability in the Middle East. 

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